

Procedure Committee

Oral evidence: Elections within the House of Commons, HC 535

Wednesday 19 November 2025

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Members present: Cat Smith (Chair); James Asser; Bambos Charalambous; Mr Lee Dillon; Graeme Downie; Mary Kelly Foy; Tracy Gilbert; Gurinder Singh Josan; John Lamont; Lee Pitcher; Michael Wheeler; Sir Gavin Williamson.

Questions 69-92

Witness

[I](#): Peter Stanyon, Chief Executive, Association of Electoral Administrators.

Examination of witness

Witness: Peter Stanyon.

Q69 Chair: Good afternoon, and welcome to this public evidence session of the Procedure Committee. This afternoon's session is the next in our inquiry into elections within the House of Commons, and I am delighted to say that we are joined by Peter Stanyon, the chief executive of the Association of Electoral Administrators. Peter is an expert in the conduct of elections and has kindly joined us to share his experience of how other elections are conducted, and to provide some comparative perspective for our inquiry as we think about how that could work in the House of Commons context. Good afternoon, Peter. Before we begin, may I ask you to introduce yourself formally for the record?

Peter Stanyon: I am Peter Stanyon, the chief executive of the Association of Electoral Administrators.

Q70 Chair: Thank you so much, Peter. As is traditional, the first question comes from me as the Chair. Approaches to how far candidates are regulated on their canvassing vary across different elections. Can you briefly set out some examples of the different ways in which that has been approached in different electoral contexts?

Peter Stanyon: Certainly. There is a jigsaw of different approaches. If we take something like the parliamentary election, which you will have obviously all been party to, there is the freepost system to allow literature to be delivered by Royal Mail. Obviously, it is then down to each individual candidate and their agent to determine how much they do or do not canvass, and whether that will be telephone canvassing, door-knocking or the like.

It does vary for other elections. In the London mayoral, combined authority mayoral and local authority mayoral elections, an election address is submitted by the candidate to the returning officer, who will then agree that it is within the realm of being suitable. In those types of elections, that is then posted to every elector; in my experience in London, the London mayoral booklet was sent out just in time for postal votes to hit mats, so that it was fair for those.

For police and crime commissioner, which will not be with us for much longer, it is all done online so that there is the ability for that election address. That takes away some of the canvassing, because, I think, of the regional nature of those elections. But it varies; for local authority elections, it is again very much down to individual candidates. The limitations on expenditure that are set within statute and are calculated per electorate—I think I am speaking to the converted on that sort of thing—are the limitations on the canvassing that can take place.



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There is no freepost for a local authority election, but there is, for example, for a parliamentary general or parliamentary by-election, so it does vary across the board.

Q71 Chair: How do candidates react to more controls on things like canvassing—do you find they are welcoming of more structure, or do they prefer more of a free-for-all?

Peter Stanyon: I am probably not the right person to ask that question, because we, as returning officers, do not get directly involved other than in analysing the content of a mayoral address that is given, where there is a responsibility to look at that.

I think it mostly comes down to communication as to what the different rules are. Before an election, there will be contact with the agents that are known with the new candidates coming through, explaining and actually diverting them to Electoral Commission guidance. That is very good at explaining things such as hustings and notional expenditure. They are the arbiter in many respects, not the returning officer. We are in a nice position of not being dragged into the “he said, she said”-type approach that might come out.

Q72 Chair: I know you cannot really answer about how candidates find it in terms of restrictions on types of canvassing, but do you have any sense about what voters prefer? Do they prefer their elections to be more tightly regulated, or the more free-for-all approach that allows candidates to be more creative?

Peter Stanyon: Not really, no. Having said that, there have been many occasions when I have had contact in, saying, “I don’t know who this party’s standing for. What are their policies?”, because they have done no canvassing at all. It could be a paper candidate; it could be a new party or a new route coming through. But equally, we do not get complaints for too many leaflets going through a door or too much contact. It tends to be the other way around: a lack of knowledge about what a candidate is standing for. Clearly, a returning officer cannot get into that debate.

Q73 Mr Dillon: I have never taken part in or lived in the area for a directly elected mayoral election. You said that the booklets are sent out to each elector, so would I and my wife get a copy, and would they land on the mailing date?

Peter Stanyon: I cannot talk for Royal Mail. The intention is that they will all arrive. The planning is always—

Q74 Mr Dillon: It is not like parliamentary freepost—where you can choose first elector, second elector—so you could phase it out?

Peter Stanyon: No. It is the electoral register in its entirety. That is, in some respects, a bone of contention because of the cost of production; is it better for households? The PCC approach was different and that was, I would guess, partly to do with cost.



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It will go to each individual, but whether you would receive the same booklet as your wife on the same day just depends on the way it is delivered by Royal Mail. The intention is always to get those booklets out ahead of the first drop of postal votes to ensure that those electors have the same access to information about the candidates as those going into a polling station.

- Q75 **Gurinder Singh Josan:** What sort of resources do you expect would be required to design a regulatory framework and then to monitor compliance and undertake enforcement measures under that framework?

Peter Stanyon: In terms of public elections or elections within the House?

- Q76 **Gurinder Singh Josan:** If you were to design a regulatory framework around canvassing and engagement with voters.

Peter Stanyon: I think the Electoral Commission gave a written submission that explained that, at the moment, the law is very loose around those things. There are criminal sanctions around incorrect information being sent about candidates, for example.

To bring in a regulatory process would require there to be a regulator, whether that be the Electoral Commission or another. I would strongly recommend the returning officers do not get involved in that because they have to run a free and fair election, and they could be fettered by decisions taken.

It is a slightly grey area when it comes to the election address that we have been talking about because, ultimately, the returning officer does not have a strict set of rules they must apply. They must just take into account whether it is misleading or inappropriate and the rules you would have had in terms of parliamentary elections mean you cannot use it for advertising, for example.

Bringing in regulation will be difficult, to govern it will be difficult, and what is achieved will depend on the cost-benefit analysis. Is there an issue with canvassing so great that it needs that sort of regulatory framework to come in?

- Q77 **Gurinder Singh Josan:** If there was a regulatory framework, overseen by people other than the returning officer, do you anticipate any problems that could then exist for returning officers?

Peter Stanyon: The difficulty is, as you are aware, once a name is on the ballot paper, it is on the ballot paper, regardless of whatever change happens after close of nominations. That, in some ways, is a safe place for a returning officer to be, because it is a straightforward answer: "I can't change that ballot paper. They're on, and that's it". If something happens affects what appears on the ballot paper out to a postal voter, and then to the polling stations, that will add a degree of confusion.

The only area where there is a slight degree of confusion at the moment—or the chance for change—is where an objection can be made in a parliamentary election in the last six hours. That means a delay until it has



been dealt with. In reality, it is very unlikely that a name would not be put on the ballot paper, because the rules the RO is working to are whether the boxes are filled in correctly and whether a false statement has been made—and that is not for us to determine; it is down to other investigations. The good news for a returning officer is that it is sealed within that bubble. If you try to break that bubble, you end up with potential confusion, because the election will still take place on the date set.

Q78 Lee Pitcher: What options for enforcement mechanisms have you come across in the context of elections where canvassing is particularly tightly regulated?

Peter Stanyon: The only time you would see that is when another candidate complains to the authorities. In that case, the authorities would be the police. They will then determine whether there is a case in the public interest to take forward. There are specific provisions within the Representation of the People Act 1983 around bribery, treating and false statements of candidates, but they still require a prosecution to be brought by the police. That is effectively the only route.

The Electoral Commission has a degree of advisory control, but it is not the prosecuting authority on a number of the issues that could arise in that way. At the moment, as the Commission said in its written submission, it is a bit of a mishmash. It is assumed that candidates in every election will be reasonable in the canvassing they do. In a contentious election, areas such as libellous statements are probably what the returning officer will get complaints about, asking, “What are you going to do to stop this?” The simple answer is that we will tell the authorities, and they will determine whether there is a case to answer.

Lee Pitcher: Thank you. I do not have a follow-up question, in that case.

Q79 Mary Kelly Foy: In your experience, to what extent have changes to the way that elections are organised—for example, to limits on timeframes—achieved some of the aims that might be sought by explicit regulation to reduce electioneering?

Peter Stanyon: The single biggest positive change was the introduction of the Electoral Commission, because it became a body that is seen as the arbiter. Whether it can do all the arbitration that it wants to do might be another matter. The sort of information it has produced that is nationally shared—guidance to tellers, the dos and don’ts of campaigns, what you can and cannot do in a postal vote opening session—provides clarity about what the sensible approaches are. That is the biggest change. The Electoral Commission came into being in 2000, so it is bedded in well in that respect.

Other than that, it comes down to what is legislated for. The London Mayor is probably the oldest mayoral version, but combined authority mayors have come in since, and they brought in the election address stuff to make it clearer that that is the best way to canvass, to give the information to the elector. They are subtle differences from what we have

in local government election rules, for example. Does that answer the question?

Mary Kelly Foy: Yes, thank you.

Q80 Mr Dillon: We will move away from the regulation side with a couple of questions on campaign material.

In general elections, volumes of campaign material are not directly limited, but, obviously, the spend on them is. Have you come across any other approaches to regulating how much campaign material can be sent out in an election?

Peter Stanyon: No, I think the simple arbiter is the cost cap put on each individual candidate, and that will obviously vary from election to election. The examples that we have talked about, the free booklet and the freepost that applies at parliamentary elections, are there for a reason—because it is a wider electorate base. At local government elections, would you require the same sort of access to that approach? It is really just down to the candidate, who will dictate the volume.

The important bit to flag on that one is that it is not necessarily just the volume; it is about the notional expenditure of things. A classic question we would be asked is, "I am a local printer; I own my own printing press. Can I just print what I like?". The answer is, "Yes, you can, but you also have to put a notional cost on that. What would it have cost you?". To be fair, that is where the control is. It comes down to expenses on the campaign, rather than the size or bulk of whatever it is, in the approach being made by each candidate.

Q81 Mr Dillon: Have you seen, in election returns, more use of national spend in local seats at all?

Peter Stanyon: Outside elections, outside the regulated periods, yes. I think, during a regulated period, it comes down to the status of the candidate and whether the seat is to be targeted—will you get the leader or a high-ranking MP coming through? But generally, most campaigning now is not—well, in my personal experience and what I have seen in my career, it is not the leaflet through the door per se. That tends to happen more outside an election period, saying, "This is what we are doing", rather than saying, "This is what we want to do." But that is a broadbrush difference. During the campaign, it is more likely that it will be a bang on the door or a telephone call, or it will be targeted—campaigns online, for example. So there has been a subtle shift, but again, it is not something our returning officers would get involved in the detail of, other than if an alleged offence has taken place on imprints or something like that.

Bambos Charalambous: Peter, it's good to be reacquainted—

Peter Stanyon: Yes, it is, Bambos.

Q82 Bambos Charalambous: Peter has overseen a number of elections in Enfield over the years, including ones that I have been involved in. My question is about excessive electioneering. Do you see that excessive



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electioneering tends to have a negative impact on candidates' electoral fortunes? Some people would say of some candidates, "The more people they meet, the fewer votes they get." I just wondered about that.

Peter Stanyon: It depends on the candidate, Bambos! No, I do not have the evidence on that. I think an academic analysis would have to be done. What I would say is that one of the really contentious parts in difficult elections is outside polling stations, with tellers and party supporters. Generally, one of the things we say to returning officers is, "You need to get that engagement, to make it clear to the individuals that the rules are there to protect the tellers, not to protect the electorate", because the accusation can be of threats or violence, which might well be going on. That is where it gets very difficult, because those individuals outside the polling station are not regulated in law. The Electoral Commission has produced a code of conduct, and it is actually adhered to across the board, but there are instances where there is that difficulty. The regulation of that is almost—forgive the analogy on this one—taking two heads and banging them together and saying, "We're all here together." Electors will turn away from a station if they feel they are being intimidated when walking into that station. I have had experience of that; in Enfield, we have had those sorts of queries come to us at times.

Q83 Mr Dillon: I have seen that example of telling and I just wonder whether complaints are more prevalent when only one party has the resources to do telling at a polling station. In the past, I have seen red, blue and yellow rosettes outside a polling station, and no one has minded, because it is quite clear that all three parties are actively engaged in it. I have also been in elections where only my party has done telling, and then lots more complaints have come in, all on Facebook—on social media—on the day of the election, saying, "Those Lib Dems are after your data! Don't give it to them." It is not about that, and if there was another party, I don't think we would have the complaints. I just wonder whether you have seen that.

Peter Stanyon: I don't think there is necessarily a trend. It depends on the election. If you are in a tight seat, or it has been a contentious election throughout, there are more likely to be raised profiles outside the polling station.

Having said that, one of the difficulties with tellers, who have a very important role to play—I had a conversation about this with a former Enfield councillor, so that I understood the reasons why a little better—is that there is the danger of its being out of sight, out of mind. There is talk of putting in a 10-metre restriction zone, or people not being permitted to be outside a polling station. If that happens, and somebody wishes to manipulate an election or be difficult, they will just do that round the corner, out of sight of the staff who are able to step in and bring it to the attention of the returning officer so that appropriate action can be taken.

It is a difficult one. A lot of it comes down to desperately trying to make sure that everybody involved on the party side—forget the candidacy; I am talking about the administration of the election—understands why the



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rules are in place and why the lines are there: to protect everybody involved in the election, including the candidates and their agents.

- Q84 **James Asser:** Some of our colleagues have said in written evidence that hustings would be a positive addition to our election process for Select Committee Chairs. Have you seen hustings used effectively elsewhere? What makes them effective for a particular election?

Peter Stanyon: I have certainly seen hustings taking place, and I have heard about them as well. At the end of the day, it comes down to providing a platform to allow for amenable debate. The challenge is always around who organises it and who chairs the event. Fortunately for me, my experience of it was arranged through a coalition of churches. They called the candidates in, and they understood the rules: you have to invite everybody. You may not agree with politics on the left, right, centre, up, down, or whatever it might well be but, as long as you do that, it does not come with expense for the candidate, and you can have a reasonable debate. It has been more about making sure that, even when candidates do not share your values, they still are invited to come.

Hustings can be really positive; the difficulty is in trying to administer them in a way that is not part of the formal elections process, but is good within the whole of the electoral process. The responsibility then sits with the candidates talking to each other and saying, "Let's put something on that will be of interest to everybody involved."

- Q85 **James Asser:** My next question links to what you said about the process. What resource implications would you expect there to be for a hustings? Do you think they are particularly onerous? Is there anything in particular that you would be concerned about?

Peter Stanyon: Not necessarily, no. It comes down to what you are trying to achieve. In the example I gave, it took place in a church hall. There were rows of chairs, a coffee urn in the corner and heating and lighting for a couple of hours. It was not a massive event. Clearly, you can do what you wish to do for a hustings event but—forgive me for saying this—they are an old-fashioned way of campaigning. You see it if you watch programmes like "Downton Abbey". That is how it was then, because the verbal communication worked better than a piece of paper going through the front door.

Hustings have an important role to play. I do not think they are used as much as they could be, but that is probably because of small-r resource implications of the arrangements and the person who takes ownership being a non-political person.

- Q86 **John Lamont:** My experience of hustings has been that most people who go to them have made up their mind already and are there to support one candidate or shout down the other. I had seven or eight hustings in my very big constituency the last time, and I saw just about the same people at them all. Do you think undecided people turn up to hustings to decide who they are going to vote for, or is it just a big platform to let people have a bit of pantomime?



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Sir Gavin Williamson: Was it just because you were not convincing enough to change anyone's mind?

Peter Stanyon: That was a leading question, wasn't it? I can only speak from my experience, and I think there were occasions on which there was doubt, when it was a tighter election. Often, if there is a huge majority, minds are more likely to be made up already. In the instance I am aware of, I genuinely think that people went there thinking, "I'm not sure whether to go with that one or that one", and waited to hear what was said. It also acts as a conduit into local and potentially national media, reporting, "This was the debate that took place." It is another tool that goes outside that room and shares the views expressed by various candidates at this particular hustings event.

It is fair to say, again, that it is a jigsaw. It works in some areas and some elections, but possibly not in others. That comes back to the resourcing question on the processes and how well it is chaired: is it worth it or not to try to draw out the answers to the more controversial issues, for example?

Q87 Tracy Gilbert: Peter, you have spoken a little about your experience of hustings; in your view, what kind of person is the best person to conduct hustings, to keep the integrity of the debate and the hustings process fair?

Peter Stanyon: It has to be—sorry to use parlance from electoral law—a person of good standing. I do not think you can turn around and say, "It must be x, y or z", but, in the example I gave, it was one or two of the local clergy, who had the standing in the community to be able to ensure free and fair debate. They will have their own views, but they are not coming to it with a presupposed, predetermined view on who they are going to give the advantage to.

If it was a regulator—going back to the earlier question about regulating hustings—you would need to have somebody of a standing that is linked to the returning officers or the Electoral Commission, or whoever it might be. The beauty of it at the moment is that it morphs into what it morphs into. It needs that person of good standing, who understands that there is a wide political spectrum, and that they have to hear views from every element of that spectrum. Going back to my earlier point, it may well be that some of those views are not widely held, but you have to give them free access, because that is, quite rightly, the way the democratic process works.

Q88 Tracy Gilbert: Do any other factors beyond the person conducting them need to be considered in the arrangements for regulating hustings?

Peter Stanyon: It comes down to when in the election it happens and making sure that every individual is entitled to attend. What are the implications if an invitation is not sent to a candidate? The only current penalty, as such, is that all the other candidates will have to treat that as an election expense, whereas the one who has not been invited does not. It is just about being clear what the framework is, and whether that still plays a role in terms of confirming views or giving people an opportunity to challenge in other areas.



Q89 Bambos Charalambous: We are doing an inquiry into the internal elections in Parliament for Select Committee Chairs. The candidates putting themselves forward are all from the same political party, because it has been agreed beforehand which Committees will be chaired by which political party. Would your answers in relation to hustings and the way they are conducted be different if there was a limited electorate of 650 people?

Peter Stanyon: No, I think I would stick with the answer that it needs to be a person of good standing in terms of being able to allow that debate, whether that is through this Committee or through the party itself, whatever the nature of the elections taking place. The chair of a hustings is no different from the Speaker or to the chair of a council, in terms of allowing free and fair debate—allowing every single person the opportunity to make whatever points they want to support their campaign. Whoever that was, it would need to be somebody with the standing and the authority to be able to govern those sorts of things.

Q90 Bambos Charalambous: What about the effectiveness? Many MPs from that particular party would know the candidates, but others from other parties may not, particularly if they were newly elected MPs. We recently had the situation in which more than half the House were freshly elected, and they were asked within weeks to choose Select Committee Chairs.

Peter Stanyon: Again, I think that partly comes down to those chairing skills, allowing the free flow of information and discerning between genuine questions and those that are not genuine. It is the freedom to get a rounded picture of the individual and what they are trying to achieve. I would take the public election scenarios that you are all aware of and apply them to the scenarios you have within the House in terms of the same principles: "Why should you elect me?". That is the message that will come through.

Certainly, jumping slightly ahead, I think there is a role to play in terms of candidate addresses, because it makes it clear, "This is what I am actually standing for".

Q91 Mr Dillon: If we were having a hustings in the House of Commons, there are not the legal concerns about inviting every candidate, but getting all the candidates for the Committee and then getting all the MPs in the same place to hear from them is, I imagine, a logistical challenge. Do you have a view on other ways in which a husting-like scenario could be performed that would work in line with how we manage our diaries in the House of Commons?

Peter Stanyon: I think it comes down again to trying to learn. The purpose of a hustings is to share information about yourself. The advantage of doing that face to face, with questions, is that the cross-examination is taking place. That is the beauty of having everybody in the room together. I would take a step back: the principal thing is making sure you understand what a person is standing for. That comes down to access to the information about what each candidate is doing.



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If I take the elections that we have within the association, we have a closed electorate of just over 2,000 and we are just about to put a notice of election up for our deputy chair. They can have one election address; their photo goes on it, and it is shared with every single elector. That is all that takes place and there is no debate beyond that. You can go slightly further if you want to and have the online—we have things like Teams and Zoom nowadays to provide access for those who cannot be in the room. I think it is really a mishmash of what you are trying to achieve in terms of access to the information, at the same time as making sure that you are not bringing in a system that becomes too onerous to operate.

Q92 Michael Wheeler: Unless anyone has a follow-up to my question, this might be your final one. You have touched on conduct and campaigning in the vicinity of polling stations. In the context of our inquiry, and to give you a little bit of a picture of what that looks like for internal elections, the polling station will be a Committee room like this and the Committee corridor that you walk down on your way in will be a tunnel of campaign teams—a gauntlet, as someone put it—with literature and last-minute pleas and all that.

That is the picture of what it looks like for us here. Drawing on your experience and in that context, what do you think might be the pros and cons of limiting the presence and campaigning actions of candidates and their representatives directly outside the room where the voting is taking place?

Peter Stanyon: Personally, I would not want to run that gauntlet, I have to say. When it comes down to it, it scares the living daylights out of me to think about that. One of the beauties of public elections, as you will know, is that the sanctity of the polling station is exactly that. Campaign material is not permitted outside polling stations, when coming in. It is a code of conduct thing; it is not legislatively debarred but, at the end of the day, the expectations are that people will not be there handing out leaflets close to a polling station, as you come into it.

The key point to it all is that, for the individual voter, it is between that individual and the ballot box. In public elections, you have the thing around intimidation, threats, bribery and treating. Are there similar things within the rules of the House to consider, or would you like to introduce bribery, treating and the like? I do not know.

Running that gauntlet—as you put it—says to me that the sanctity of the polling station is being slightly sullied—although I am using much too strong a word there. The first time you have a chance to think straight will be when you are in the room, or before you have arrived in that corridor. I think, in all honesty, the campaigning should have been finished well in advance of the ballot papers being put into the ballot box. Again, taking from your experiences of your own elections, at what point do you determine that there is no point asking any more?

When talking in the briefings for this session, it comes down to really asking the candidates for the seats to determine what is being produced.



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Is that going to be really effective, or—to go back to my earlier point—does it turn people off voting for candidates in that way? There has to be a judgment call. Now, whether that is legislated for—that is not the right word; I say it with a small “l”—or whether that is something that becomes a code of conduct or a memorandum of understanding is really for you to determine, and you will be the ones on the receiving end of that campaign material. I question, when you are walking down the corridor, what the purpose of that campaigning is. Is it going to change my mind from one end to the other, by the time I walk into the individual room? I would certainly say that you would want a sterile area to allow people to have that free thought.

Chair: Thank you. If there are no further questions from colleagues, let me thank you, Peter, for your time this afternoon. If there is anything further that you want to add to our inquiry, we are very happy to take that in writing. Otherwise, that concludes today’s evidence session.